
Contes et légendes – Short Stories

Ascent of Owl's Head – 1864

by John Ross Dix

Ascent of Owl's Head

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And now, having visited all the islands, suppose we ascend the Owl's Head Mountain, and at one bird's eye glance, observe, as a whole, scenes which we have been describing in detail, as well as countless attractions besides. A few maxims for "Mountaineers," may be in place here.

Ladies – even though it should cost you a parting pang, when preparing for the upward trip, abandon crinoline and hoop – and don't dress yourself as Villikin's Dinah¹ was ordered to "in gorgeous array." The worse your attire, the better you will feel. Wear stout shoes or boots; if damp weather, rubbers; and should

¹ "Villikins and his Dinah" is a stage song which emerged in England in 1853 as a burlesque version of a traditional ballad called "William and Dinah". Its great popularity led to the tune being later adopted for many other songs. Go Dinah and dress yourself in costly array, For I've met with a young man both gallant and gay, I've met with a man worth ten thousand a year, He says he will make you his bride and his dear.

you *have* a Bloomer² Costume, put it on by all means, for in some parts of the ascent, you will "bless your stars, and think it luxury" - at least you'll find it amazingly convenient.

Provide yourself with a staff some five feet long, a little sharp at the lower end; something in fact, like the Swiss Alpenstock³ which is shod with iron; this, however, is only necessary where ice has to be crossed, and such is not the case here.

Do not be in a hurry when you set out; take it coolly at first; you will experience the great benefit of thus husbanding your strength when you get half way up, where it will be most needed.

Carry with you some biscuits or sandwiches, and a little tin cup for water - there are several springs on the way up.

These maxims are for ladies; as for the "sterner and stronger" (?) sex, they must get on or up as they best can, without advice from us.

A direction post on the north side of the Mountain House, indicates the path to the summit. For a little way the course is tolerably level, but after about ten minutes walking, the ascent commences in earnest. On either side the path is bounded by woods, where the wild bird sings and the squirrel gambols undisturbed. Before long, you perceive before

² Bloomer : Also called the "Turkish dress", "American dress", or simply "reform dress", bloomers were an innovation of readers of the *Water-Cure Journal*, a popular health periodical that, in October 1849, began urging women to develop a style of dress that was not so harmful to their health as the current fashion. It also represented an unrestricted movement, unprecedented by previous women's fashions, that allowed for greater freedom – both metaphorical and physical – within the public sphere.

³ Alpenstock is a long wooden pole with an iron spike tip, used by shepherds for travel on snowfields and glaciers in the Alps since the Middle-Ages.

and above you, a singular rock of very large size, projecting over the path from the right hand side. This is called *Shelter Rock*; a name not altogether inappropriate, as a large party might find refuge from a shower, beneath its overhanging portion. We may here mention that Owl's Head is remarkable for its picturesque rocks. A very eminent landscape painter remarked to us last summer, that he had never, anywhere else, met with such excellent "studies", in this respect, for an artist. Not far beyond "Shelter," is High Rock - a huge mass of stone crowned with plummy ferns⁴, and half clad with the greenest moss. A little brook of the purest water is soon reached - it is this stream which supplies the fish pond below. The rivulet crossed, after a rather steep "grade", you hear the tinkle of cow-bells, and suddenly enter a large open space, almost circular in shape and nearly level. After the brisk climbing, the pathway through the *Old Field*, as it is termed, is a pleasant change enough. You may, if you choose, loiter and pick berries – mulberries, blackberries, raspberries, &c., and wild flowers, which are very abundant.

Here you have a fine view of one of the mountain ledges, which if you are a sketcher, you will not fail to transfer to your portfolio. Nor will the "Amphitheatre of woods", also visible here, be without its attractions. A "sugar camp" is next passed - in other words, a maple grove; and then we arrive at a circular sort of basin named *Fern Hollow* - the said basin being quite covered with those plants. Still ascending, we get to *Fern Rock*, where a botanist might long luxuriate. The way now becomes pretty steep, but if you halt occasionally to recover breath, you may use your eyes as well as rest your lungs, for there are plenty of objects worthy attention.

⁴ Plummy ferns: the epithet seems to be given from the resemblance of the fern to a feather. Many kinds of fern may have this resemblance: lady-fern, marsh-fern, etc.

For instance, here is *Birch Rock*. On the steep hill-side above you are two large, oblong granite rocks - their ends being placed so close together that there does not appear room to place a finger's point between. Yet in that fissure is sufficient earth to nourish a fine birch tree, which seems to rise from, and grow out of the lower stone. *Chester Rock* (named after a very intelligent boy guide) is a huge mass of limestone partly covered with moss, and crowned with white pine. Onward and upward we go, until we are brought to a stand at the *Toll-Gate*, where it is by no means an unusual thing to find a toll-keeper also. This Toll-Gate is formed by two large rocks, from whose upper surface trees spring upwards, and between which, there is just room for one very stout, or two very slim persons to walk abreast. Hoops have no chance here, unless the circles are changed into ovals, or elipsis. We have known ladies who were compelled to retire to a leafy bower, hard by, called *Crinoline Chamber*, and divest themselves of their "hindrances," for a Camel may as well attempt to go through the eye of a needle, as a fashionably dressed lady to get through the Toll-Gate. This perilous "pass" having been accomplished, the next object of attraction is the *Chair Rock*, from whose summit the first view of the lake during the ascent, is obtained. Beyond this is *Half-way Log*, where we had better rest; and while we do so, let us state that away to our right, and below us, is one of the most remarkable "bits" of scenery on the mountain; though as it lies out of the main pathway, but comparatively few stumble on it, except by accident. It may, though, be easily reached from the Mountain House, in half an hour. It is a bold escarpment of rock, forming part of the lower of the two ledges which runs across the mountain's eastern side. Two huge walls of limestone meeting in a V shape, enclose near their bases, a triangular platform, some 12 feet from the ground, on which grow grass and wild flowers. Beneath this verdant shelf is a solid rock, near the centre of the face

of which, is a small orifice about the size of a goose-quill, from which a stream of the purest water perpetually flows. How far this natural conduit extends cannot be known. It is a natural curiosity, which would be well worth a visit, even were it not for the grandeur of the rocks which tower high above it.

But by this time we have rested, and are now ready for the "tug" of war. Now are to come the "pinches" as the guides say. Here is the first of them - *Breakneck Stairs*. Do not be alarmed at the name, no one ever dislocated their cervical vertebrae there that we are aware of; nor have we, for already we have surmounted them with sculls as well supported as ever. More stairs! Yes - those we now arrive at are named after an "inferior" portion of the frame. Let us buckle to, and try *Weary-toe Steps*. Not so bad though, as the name seems to imply, but the necessity of using our pedal extremities, *does* make them ache a trifle, that's a fact! Next come *Jennings' Staircase*, and *Winding Staircase*, and then *Refreshment Hollow*, where your little tin can will be found useful in conveying water from the spring to your lips. Somewhat refreshed, we now set out for *Spruce Tree Steps* - the roots of those trees forming the stairs. Then comes *Fountain Ravine*, where you will find a little fountain right in the pathway. The next ascent is named after a curious birch tree on the right. Courage - we are getting near the summit! *Shamrock Rock* and the *Giant's Staircase* are "done", and clear of the forests, we stand on the summit of Owl's Head - nearly 3000⁵ feet above the waters of Memphremagog.

As we rest on one of the crags, a pair of Eagles are seen sailing in the air far below us; their rich brown plumage and bald white heads gleaming in the sunshine. They build on some of the inaccessible crags about here. Falcons of many varieties make their homes on the

⁵ De facto, 750 meters, 2460 feet.

ledges below. Fish Hawks⁶, a species of Osprey, too, are common. Last summer, we saw one of these birds strike a large fish in the lake, opposite the Mountain House - a fish too large for the winged angler to carry off after it had killed it. Mr. Jennings despatched a boat to the scene of slaughter, from which the Osprey sulkily wheeled away, and a fine shad⁷ of four pounds weight smoked on our breakfast table next morning. It is not every landlord who has a bird to provide fish for his guests.

The prospect from Owl's Head summit is magnificent beyond description. On clear days, Montreal can be distinctly seen. Looking south you see Clyde, Barton and Black Rivers, Newport, all the islands on the lake, and the lake itself from end to end. To the north, Durham's Point, Dewey's Point, Knowlton Bay, the Outlet⁸, Orford Mountain, and countless other objects. To the east, Seymour Lake, Stanstead Plain, Rock Island, Salem Pond, Charleston Pond, Derby Centre, Derby line, Willoughby Lake, White Mountains, Little Magog, Massawippee Lake, Georgeville, &c. To the west, the continuation of the Green Mountain Range. To the north-west, the Sugar Loaf and Ridge Mountain, Broome Lake, North and South Troy, Mansonville, and a mile and a

⁶ Fish Hawks: The osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) - also called fish eagle, sea hawk, river hawk, and fish hawk - is a diurnal, fish-eating bird of prey with a cosmopolitan range. It is a large raptor, reaching more than 60 cm (24 in) in length and 180 cm (71 in) across the wings. It is brown on the upperparts and predominantly greyish on the head and underparts. Wikipedia.

⁷ The American shad (*Alosa sapidissima*), is a species of anadromous clupeid fish naturally distributed on the North American coast of the North Atlantic, from Newfoundland to Florida, and as an introduced species on the North Pacific coast. The American shad is not closely related to the other North American shads. Rather, it seems to form a lineage that diverged from a common ancestor of the European taxa before these diversified. A mistake? Maybe it was a walleye.

⁸ Outlet, name of Magog until 1855.

half of wilderness stretching from the base of Owl's Head. These are but a few of the objects discernable; we have not space to mention a tithe of them. But let us examine the summit itself. As might be expected from its appearance from below, it is all split up, or riven, into gorges and ravines from which four distinct peaks ascend. In one of these ravines is the *Freemason's Lodge*, so named from the fact that the Golden Rule Lodge of Stanstead, hold a lodge there once a year, on the 24th of June. It is a spot well calculated for exercising the mysteries of the craft. On a triangular rock are painted the compass and square, and below that masonic emblem the following inscription:

GOLDEN RULE LODGE,

No. 8, Freemasons of Stanstead,
held a Communication here
Sept. 10, A. L. '57 and '58.

R. W. Brother E. Gustin, D. D., G. M., V. W.

B. W. Rev. H. J. Machin – W. M.

E. B. Gustin, P. M.

E. B. Rider, A. Bodwell

S. Kingsbury, T. I. M.

C. B. Baxter, E. H. Fennessy

N. Bachelder, A. C. Hall

C. S. Channell, A. S. Gove

The descent of the Mountain is comparatively easy. It is remarkable that although so many persons of both sexes have ascended the mountain, no serious accidents have happened; indeed such need not occur, if but common care be taken. A few months since, however, a man named Sabine, had a narrow escape. Near, or rather on the summit is a place called the *Devil's Slide*. Down this, a party of three determined to go, on their way home; two were in port, and these were not a little astounded and dismayed by seeing their companion suddenly shoot by them and suddenly disappear over a ledge, sheer 30 feet deep. He had set out running to overtake his friends and could not stop himself. They of course expected to find him dead and mangled, and cautiously picking their way over

the loose stones, at length reached him at the foot of *another* precipice, sixty feet deep, lying face downward, on a bed of broken rocks! Sabine had struck a rocky shelf after his first descent, and bounding off, ball like, went over the second - 90 feet in all. His friends finding him motionless, and to all appearance dead, suggested the propriety of getting assistance to take down the body, for "poor fellow, *he's gone*" said one of them. No sooner were the word's uttered, however, than Sabine first lifted one leg, then his head, and said coolly, "Come along boys, this is the quickest way down!" The poor fellow was a good deal hurt, but no bones were broken, and with assistance he descended. A fortnight's care set him to rights again. We said, the place he shot from was called *Devil's Slide*, but as there is no record of that sable gentleman's having performed such an extraordinary feat of "ground and lofty tumbling," as Mr. Sabine did - the latter is clearly entitled to have his name substituted for Satan's, and accordingly Sabine's leap has quite superseded the diabolic appellation.

The mineral riches of Owl's Head have been but imperfectly developed. Some years ago, Indians used to dig there for lead, and in later times, some white people also commenced workings; but, as in the case of the Novaculite⁹, the Government stepped in and stopped proceedings. The Mountain was also the scene of a hoax, by some scamp who pretended to have had spiritual revelations concerning mineral riches there, and who duped not a few credulous noodles.

Source

Dix, John Ross. *A Hand Book for Lake Memphremagog*, Evans & Co., Boston, 1864, 56 p., p. 35-44.

⁹ Novaculite, a very dense, light-coloured, even-textured sedimentary rock, a bedded chert in which microcrystalline silica (silicon dioxide, SiO₂) in the form of quartz predominates over silica in the form of chalcedony.